

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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## Diamond in the Rough

DESIGN | By MATT TYRNAUER | April 11, 2014, 9:00 AM



Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds. Alma Allen never names his artworks, like these large pieces made of wood and Yule marble, set against the vast desert landscape in which he resides.

Alma Allen sees his life as having been defined by a series of risks. His sprawling desert compound in Joshua Tree, Calif., where the 43-year-old self-taught artist creates sculptures fashioned of marble, wood and bronze, is evidence that those risks have started to yield great rewards. Allen's studio and house, which he designed and built himself, have, over the past few years, become a pilgrimage destination for loyal collectors, who include art world sophisticates like the hotelier Peter Morton, the philanthropist Beth Rudin DeWoody and the artist Jack Pierson. His cultish followers often show up in person, buying pieces out of Allen's living room, because, until recently, he was not even represented by a gallery, and had, with few exceptions, never even formally exhibited his work.

"My sculpture has always existed in private," Allen says, "because it didn't really fit into any category. My carving was very small, from stone fragments

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or salvaged wood. It was very rough and primitive. I was self-taught. It wasn't really outsider art because that is really the art of the insane. I sort of defied categories, and now I am a little nervous about ceasing to be a 'private' artist, because I have never even been criticized or reviewed."

The quiet, covert phase of Allen's career came to a boisterous end last month when three of his larger pieces — sensuous biomorphic forms, one made of white Colorado Yule marble, one of black marble and one carved from a half-ton walnut-wood burl — went on display at the Whitney Biennial. Michelle Grabner, the Biennial co-curator who selected Allen for the show, views his work as "an offspring of Brancusi and early-20th-century abstraction," which she feels embodies Allen's imagination while underscoring physical properties of the materials he carves. Allen says that he is simply an inveterate — even compulsive — chipper and chiseler, who prefers his unconscious creations to his conscious ones. "I have a habit of doing meditative handwork, just sitting and filing away at stone for hours," he tells me, while sitting in his Schindleresque living room, fiddling with a block of green modeling clay, first forming a leaf, then a tiny bowl, then a little tree. "Most of my work is not abstract, but I don't title my work because I don't want people to think of me when they see it. I kind of prefer to be hidden. I don't know why. It's probably because I'm shy and uncomfortable around people. I don't have regular art impulses that are explainable in 'art terms,' and I am basically making the same work as I made as a child. I don't know if I would be making the shapes I'm making now if I hadn't seen Brancusi, but I think it's basically the same."



Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds. Allen's touch can be found almost everywhere in his home, especially in the kitchen, which features cabinets, a table and miniature sculptures, all made by him.

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According to Roman Alonso, a partner in the L.A. design studio Commune, which has commissioned sculpture and furniture from Allen for clients such as Katy Perry and the Ace hotels, “Alma, up until now, has been content to work off the radar as well as off the grid. His rise in the art world has been anything but plotted out. He’s a true self-creation, an intuitive player, living by his wits and, at times, by the skin of his teeth.”

The first and easily the most daring risk of Allen’s life was when he ran away from his large Mormon family in Heber City, Utah. A towheaded skateboarding rebel — one of 11 children — Allen was, at times, sent away to live with an aunt, and became increasingly antisocial. “At 14 or 15 I used to go into the hills a lot, where there were Indian caves with carvings and abandoned mines. I used to fantasize these people” — the Indians and the miners — “were still out there, still around. You still find Indian petroglyphs in that area, and that was the first inspiration for what I do. I loved finding these objects, and I used to use a pocketknife to carve little sculptures in the caves, thinking that the people who made the petroglyphs would find them. I still do that. I make things and leave them places.”

When he turned 16, Allen fled to Salt Lake City and bussed tables and worked construction. “At the time I didn’t think of myself as a runaway. I just left,” he says. “I was a normal person, but when you are surrounded by people who believe such a crazy thing there’s no place for you in their lives.”



Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds. Clockwise from top left: the artist outside his secluded Joshua Tree home; Allen’s small, scattered creations made of wood, bronze and marble; the artist’s unassuming home in the desert; his business partner, Nancy Pearce, and their 4-year-old daughter, Frieda, in the bedroom.

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In 1986, Allen met Nancy Pearce, who spotted him in a group of skateboarders. “Alma had a broken leg. He was a very cute guy with long blond hair,” Pearce says. “And, because of the leg he was moving slowly, so I could catch up and talk with him.” Allen and Pearce, who have a 4-year-old daughter, became a couple, and though that aspect of their relationship recently came to an end, they continue to be business partners.

“The way Alma went about his work was sort of like the mentality of a skater-punk artist,” Pearce says. “There has always been a cult following of people who were attracted to these little fetishlike carvings he did,” she adds. “Hewing things out of wood and stone is absolutely an extension of Alma. He was doing it without giving much thought to it ever since I met him.”

In 1993, Allen moved to New York City. After a few months he was hit by a bus while biking. His injuries were severe. “I had no insurance. I didn’t have any family, and when I got out of the hospital I couldn’t walk,” he recalls. “I was on crutches for about three months, and down to my last \$20. I had to sell most of my stuff to pay back-rent” — for the time he spent hospitalized. Unable to afford food, he says, “a Dominican deli, where I used to go to buy beans and bread, took pity on me and let me open an account.”



Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds. The sitting room acts as a livable gallery, showcasing sculptural pieces by Allen alongside furniture like an Eames rocking chair.

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“It was out of pure desperation,” Allen says, that he lugged an antique ironing board from his apartment to Prince Street in SoHo and arranged about 10 hand-carved objects on top of it. “I was just trying to get \$20 to eat and enough to get back to work,” he recalls. “I had the ironing board as a console table in my apartment in Williamsburg, and I could take it on the subway.” It was, it turned out, a fortuitous spot — a few feet away from the now-defunct Jerry’s restaurant, which was frequented by SoHo art gallerists.

“Some days I sold everything on the ironing board,” Allen says. “I was selling things for \$50, sometimes \$40 or \$20. They were funny little things, very simplistic: a little hat made of quartz, an abstract wooden mouse and depictions of disfigurement and pain, like nails going into organs and things that come out of frustration. Very personal things that I made for me.” At that time, within blocks of Allen’s ironing board were the offices and studios of people like the designer Todd Oldham, the jeweler Ted Muehling and the design maven Murray Moss. They all bought pieces. “People like Ted Muehling set up private shows for me, and after the private shows I ended up in about 30 private collections. It was sort of dumb luck. I didn’t ever pursue the art gallery owners,” Allen says. “I didn’t really understand why they wanted my objects. In fact, I was naïve and showed them my paintings. They were too polite to tell me, ‘We don’t want your terrible paintings. There are 10,000 terrible painters out there.’” Allen emphasizes: “This is why I talk about taking risks: Even if some days I sold everything, at the time it was kind of humiliating. I kind of felt like I was begging. But had I not been willing to take the risk to go on the street with the ironing board, if I had not met these people I had met by standing on that block, my life would not have been the same.”

After almost a decade in New York, Allen moved to Los Angeles, where he was reunited with Pearce, his former girlfriend. They opened a pop-up store called Pearce, selling Allen’s pieces. The shop, which operated for four years, was located on the once-bohemian Abbot Kinney Boulevard in Venice, and functioned like a walk-in version of Allen’s ironing board: small sculptures arranged on tables and shelves designed and built by Allen. Alonso, along with one of his partners at Commune, Pamela Shamshiri, stumbled upon the store one day. “We were taken with the art and the furniture Alma had built,” Alonso says. “He had never considered making furniture to sell before, but we persuaded him to create pieces for our clients.”

Allen is somewhat conflicted about his almost accidental furniture-designing career, which, he admits, has often financed his art career. “It’s hard to turn down furniture because people pay up front,” he says. “There were galleries who were interested in my work in the past but they lost interest because I was making furniture, which was strange to me because



Photograph by Lisa Eisner.  
Produced by Michael  
Reynolds.  
A curvaceous carving among

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there are a lot of artists who did that. Noguchi and Judd made a lot of furniture.”

The art collector Mark Fletcher, who has been a strong supporter of Allen’s work, encouraged him to continue making furniture. “It is highly sculptural — a scaled-up version of his earlier smaller works, yet with functionality,” Fletcher says. “I had hoped to provide Alma the opportunity of synthesizing his two disciplines. I have also encouraged Alma to scale up his work in general.”

Increasing the physical size of his work — and therefore the complexity of producing it — has proved a big challenge for Allen. In 2006 he developed a crippling case of carpal tunnel syndrome, which prevented him from using



Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds. Allen enlisted the help of a giant robotic arm to help him sculpt and carve dense materials like marble and wood after developing carpal tunnel syndrome.

his hand tools for any extended period of time. He underwent surgery on his hands in 2011, but he still cannot carve for more than an hour or two at a time.

Allen’s solution to this problem was typically bold and imprudent: He bought his own robot. And mortgaged his house to pay for it.

The massive, orange-painted computer-operated arm, 12 feet in length, resides in its own structure in back of his studio, where it carves marble and contours 500-pound burls of wood. It “used to make cars in Spain,” Allen tells me, “we were able to get it cheap, at auction, for \$25,000. If I had bought it new it would’ve been \$200,000. It was worth it to me in order to

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keep control of my carving, because when you send things out to fabricators they change things.”

“The robot was my secret,” says Allen, who was reluctant to reveal its existence. “I was actually quite anxious about it, because whenever I hear the computer is involved in something, I assume that it has an evenness, a regularity. But this isn’t that at all. This is really an extension of what I was doing before, only a tool, because I’m using a scanner and an Italian software developed just for making sculpture to tell the robot to follow what I’ve made in my own hand. It’s nothing more than a glorified, one-ton chisel that I operate.”

“It’s kind of incongruous, this machine toiling away and peaceful desert,” Pearce says. Wood chips scatter like shrapnel under a powerful drill bit as Allen and his various assistants operate the machine, in this case, carving a sculpture out of a gnarly tree stump. In order to save money, he figured out how to assemble the robot systems himself after only a few weeks of intensive training outside of Pisa.

Allen says the strangest thing to him about his expanding enterprise, built into the landscape partly from rocks he found nearby, is that he is never alone in the complex, which he constructed on zero-interest credit cards and the sweat of his brow. “I’m used to working alone, so now with these people and the robot around here I’m always looking for obscure corners of the compound I can hide in,” he says. Among the very few non-Allen-created objects in the airy, open-plan house is that antique ironing board, leaning against a wall. The board, he says, as well as the desert landscape, visible from every room of this house, remind him of his past. “I was a high-school dropout, a runaway,” Allen tells me. “I never went to art school. The only school I ever went to was robot training school in Italy for a couple of weeks. I just have no risk aversion. If it’s a crazy risk, I’ll take it. As a result, I may be the only sculptor in the U.S. with his own robot.” He looks down in shyness. “But somehow it seems to have worked out.”

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Photograph by Lisa Eisner. Produced by Michael Reynolds. Allen with his daughter, Frieda.

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